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'Love From Afar': Music and Longing Across Time, Space, and Diaspora

Kay Kaufman Shelemay

Among the most powerful and enduring of the many emotions in human life is love. And surely no other emotion is so pervasively expressed through musical composition and performance. Neuroscientists have recently argued for music's role in the evolution of the human species as well as the on-going role of music in shaping human social life. The power of music to index emotional states, including feelings of attachment and love, is at the center of Steven Mithen's suggestion that Neanderthals communicated through a sonic proto-language that was a precursor to both human music and language. (Mithen, p 26-27, 94, 221)

Daniel Levitin has included love songs in his "soundtrack of civilization," a typology that seeks to take "account of the impact music has had on the course of our social history" (Levitin, p. 3). Thus the subject of music and love is a rich one and has been explored from multiple disciplinary perspectives beyond the boundaries of humanistic scholarship.

As an ethnomusicologist who studies music's role in the course of everyday life and experience, I have been increasingly engaged with studies of people who are forced to migrate far away from home, family, and homeland and who as a result must form new communities abroad. In these cases of forced migration and lives newly formed in diaspora, music, and especially song, provides an expressive medium through which the experience of love from a distance can be given full emotional expression. Thus when I received the invitation to participate in the Eranos Dialogue on "Love and the Musical Arts: Reflecting on Enchanting Powers that Modulate the Soul," my thoughts immediately turned to the subject of musical

manifestations of love expressed over periods of time, across great distances, and under conditions of stress and separation. While most expressions of love involve feelings of joy and of pain at different moments, these sentiments become all the more conflicted and powerful when love is expressed as an attachment that exists at a distance so great it cannot be easily traversed. The musical manifestations of love from afar, with its simultaneous connections to both pleasure and pain, are the subject of this essay.

I have borrowed the first part of my title from Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho's opera, 'Love from Afar' (*L'Amour De Loin*," 2000). The libretto, imaginatively constructed by Amin Maalouf and based in part on surviving 12th century songs, narrates a long-distance love between a French prince and troubadour of that period, Jaufré Rudel, and Clémence, the Countess of Tripoli. The protagonists are connected by the Pilgrim, who travels back and forth, conveying the troubadour's songs of love from afar and the Countess' responses. The story concludes with the troubadour's attempt to reach Tripoli, where he arrives mortally ill, meeting the countess just moments before his death. He dies in her arms, and in despair, the Countess announces her intention to enter a convent. The opera ends with the Countess offering a prayer, whether to God or to her "love from afar," left purposefully ambiguous. In this opera, love, as expressed through the musical arts, is constituted of equal parts of imagination, mystical union, and the pain of separation. Thus love is portrayed as giving rise to great devotion which is unrequited, impossible to attain.

While acknowledging the power of this example, we don't have to look back to the 12th century or restrict ourselves to operatic dramatizations to find many musical manifestations of love from afar. It is clear that, whatever the period and place, there are commonalities in love's experience as well as its musical expression under conditions of distance and separation. Shared themes include psychological stresses that run the gamut from fear, to obsession, to fantasy.¹ There are also distinctive cultural frameworks that shape these experiences of love from afar, derived from specific historical situations and locally held attitudes toward separation, displacement, and exile. And in many cases, as we have already seen in the Saariaho opera discussed above, there may be spiritual or religious overtones to unrequited love that are expressed through different denominational frameworks of piety and forgiveness. I would like to weave all of these themes through the following discussion about how music gives voice to love and longing across distances shaped by time, space, and circumstance, shifting forward in time from the medieval period evoked in the Saariaho opera to present-day circumstances that are an increasingly common aspect of the twenty-first-century human condition. One finds music often used to transmit sentiments of love across great distances in our modern world, although recording media and/or the web today often replace the proverbial Pilgrim (or another human mediator) as the conveyers of this sound art. In the examples given below, I am particularly interested in the power of love from

¹ These and the themes to follow have been proposed in relation to Saariaho's opera by Sanna Iitti in an article titled "L'amour de loin: Kaija Saariaho's First Opera." *IAWM Journal* (2002), http://www.iawm.org/articles_html/Iitti_saariaho.html

afar as expressed through the songs and sounds of diaspora communities that have been forged through the trauma of forced migration.

I will focus on the role of music in expressing sentiments of love and longing among Ethiopian Orthodox Christian refugees and immigrants, who, since the advent of the Ethiopian revolution in 1974, have been displaced from their historical homeland in the Horn of Africa to communities scattered world-wide. Although Ethiopians have had some experience with displacement abroad in earlier epochs through the Red Sea and Indian Ocean slave trades, the late twentieth - century chapter of forced migration differs in its genesis in internal revolutionary ferment, its sheer numbers, and its destinations.² While Ethiopian concepts of migration (*səddät*) and refugeeism (*səddätännänät*) have changed over the course of time, moving from “being little mentioned but negative concepts to being a subject much more broadly invoked as an integral part of Ethiopian life” (Getahun , p. 341), the condition of exile has given rise to rich Ethiopian song repertoires.

I will suggest that the musical manifestations of “love from afar” so much at the center of expressive culture in the Ethiopian diaspora today, has roots in longstanding Ethiopian traditions about longing and nostalgia, with music historically providing a venue to express feelings of connection to people, places, beliefs, and experiences from which an individual has been separated. We might wish to go so far as to argue that song transcends the expression of love to become a

² There was also an Ethiopian ecclesiastical community in Jerusalem for at least the last millennium. See Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Steven Kaplan, “Introduction,” to “Special Issue: Creating the Ethiopian Diaspora: Perspectives from Across the Disciplines.” *Diaspora*, Vol. 15, Nos. 2/3, Fall/Winter 2006 (published 2011): 196-97.

surrogate for what has been lost— whether a lover, family, country, or an entire way of life. While my examples are drawn from Ethiopian culture, the processes to which they testify are shared across the world. If the Ethiopian diaspora has given rise to a rich repertoire of songs of love and longing, we can locate similar forms of expression in historical African American traditions such as the blues, or, moving beyond the realm of song to the distinctive timbre of a musical instrument closely associated with a distant homeland, the power of the Armenian duduk to represent and evoke sentiments of homeland across the Armenian diaspora.

Below I will offer two Ethiopian songs as examples that convey and elucidate dimensions of love from afar. Both are arranged and/or composed by the accomplished Ethiopian singer and songwriter Aster Aweke, who migrated from Ethiopia in the early 1980s to the United States.³ Aster (Ethiopians are traditionally called by their first names) grew up in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian family and attended Orthodox rituals from an early age. She is a native speaker of Amharic, for centuries the national Ethiopian language, characterized by rich figures of speech that carry double meanings, termed wax and gold (*sam-ennä warq*). In Ethiopian tradition, these two semantic layers are named after “the work of the goldsmith, who constructs a clay mold around a form created in wax and then, draining the wax, pours the molten gold into that form” (Levine, 5). Thus the “wax” is the

³ The first song, “Tizita,” can be heard on track three on Aster Aweke’s CD *Aster*, issued at New York City in 1990 by Columbia Records. Aster arranged this traditional song, performed to the accompaniment of the Ethiopia lyre, the *krar*, played by Kassa Admassu. The second song, “Yikrta,” is heard on track 11 on Aster’s CD *Fiker* (lit. “Love”), released and distributed by Electra Music Shop at Addis Ababa in 2006. Aster composed the music and text of “Yikrta,” which is accompanied by Samson Jufar, drums; Kibret Zekios, guitar; and Abagasu Shiota, keyboard.

apparent, outer meaning, while the “gold” is the true, inner meaning of the phrase or text.

The two songs are both love songs. They reflect communicate sentiments through music across far flung boundaries of time and space. Aster has observed that she began writing love songs “because they cannot be misinterpreted,” an acknowledgement of the layers of meaning ubiquitous in Ethiopian languages and the perception that love songs may be just what they appear to be. (Interview with Aster Aweke by author, Cambridge, MA, 6, April 2009). Love here is expressed in a manner that draws on multiple levels of Ethiopian individual and social experience. Consideration of the English translations⁴ of the two song texts illuminates ways in which music and love connect with multiple domains of Ethiopian sensibility, at moments blending religious images with the erotic.

Song 1: *Tizita* (Memories)

“Tizita,” is the best-known traditional Ethiopian musical expression of love and longing, a song with ambiguous references that traditionally move between love of an individual and that of the beloved motherland. Tizita was sung in Ethiopia long before the inception of the late twentieth-century revolution and period of forced migration, providing clear indications of the ways in which wax and gold shape Ethiopian verbal ambiguity. The word “tizita,” which can be translated as memory (in both the singular and the plural) or as nostalgia (Leslau ,p. 785 and

⁴ “Tizita” (“Memories”) was translated by Alula Andeta in 1989 and published in the notes accompanying the recording *Aster*. “Yikrta” (“Forgive Me”) was translated by Dr. Telahun Gebrehiwot during research sessions with me in 2009.

842), is also the name of the most common of the four tuning systems and categories of melody heard within Ethiopian secular music of the highland plateau region. The use of this particular tuning signals to the practiced ear a mood of melancholy and longing that underscores the sentiments of the text.

Following the first wave of forced migration abroad in the mid-1970s, “Tizita” became the signature ballad of the Ethiopian diaspora, sung in multiple versions by innumerable singers in many different contexts. Aster’s recording of “Tizita” discussed here dates from the end of the 1980s, approximately eight years after her departure from her homeland.

Tizita (“Memories”)

You are my memory, I have no other memory

Promising to come, yet breaking this promise yourself

Please let him come by horse, softly

A man of his kind never uses a mule

My cry for your love has become music to your ear

Please remember I am haunted by love and affection.

Look at me, I’ve grown thin because of your love.

I only wish I could be free of your love.

I imagined baking bread in an oven of moonlight.

How could people start gossiping about things I haven’t done?

I see him everyday in my daily dream

My obsession with him has become my only food

I am restless and sleepless in the middle of the night

I wonder where my love is?

I wonder.

In this version of “Tizita”, Aster expresses the obsession with love of country and/or lover. She articulates ways in which music has become a love cry for what remains only in her memory, an attachment which she at once desires to renew and from which she at the same time wishes to be free. Other figures of speech reflect the tradition of wax and gold, carrying special historical meanings here, such as the reference to the lover as an Ethiopian nobleman, who, like the now departed Ethiopian emperors and aristocracy, were sometimes referred to poetically by the names of their horses. The song conveys many opposing images, swinging back and forth between descriptions of starvation on one hand, and procreation, on the other, in the second and third verses. Both temporal displacement and spatial distance from the site of memory give rise to restlessness, and by the end of the song, the singer’s dislocation is complete, ending: “I wonder where my love is? I wonder.”

The performance of “Tizita” is marked by subtle vocal articulations that convey aurally the physical pain of unrequited love and longing. Other physical and psychological manifestations of love are conveyed by the rapid declamation of the song text, which underscores the feelings of restlessness, obsession, and

sleeplessness described throughout. The use of the traditional, six-stringed lyre to accompany the song provides an additional level of ambiguity since the lyre is known in Ethiopian folklore as “the devil’s instrument.” Here we encounter again the marked dualism of love, associated both with the sacred love of God and with carnal desire. Indeed, Ethiopian oral traditions transmitted by musicians who play the instrument, recount the genesis of the *krar* as an act of jealousy by the Devil who resented the larger ten-stringed lyre earlier made by God:

“God Himself made the *begenä* [box-lyre] and gave it to *Dawit* [the Biblical King David]. “Use this instrument to adorn and praise My name,” God said. God tuned the ten strings to the ten forces of goodness and virtue (*awtar*) that governed the universe. The inspired *Dawit* composed his psalms, sang to the greatness and glory of God, and accompanied himself on the *begenä*. The scheming devil, envious and green-eyed, made the *krar* in distorted imitation. “Play it and adore all the worldly pleasures,” said the devil to man. The *krar*, nicknamed the devil’s instrument (*yeseyTan mesaria*), is an instrument used to arouse the emotions of wretchedness and destructiveness as well as to accompany songs that praise carnal love and feminine beauty. It is sometimes used to accompany songs of obscenity. (Kebede, 381, quoting Melaku Gelaw, accomplished *krar* player and instrument maker.)

Thus the song “Tizita” and Aster Aweke’s performance of it accompanied by the traditional lyre sustain the multiple ambiguities of the Ethiopian love song, expressing love for either nation or lover, and an attachment that may be manifested by restraint and virtue, or experienced as unbridled passion. We find

similar themes in the second song, but with additional markers of diasporic displacement.

Song 2: *Yiqrta* ("Forgive Me")

The second song considered here, "*Yiqrta*," gives voice to the pain of separation sparked both by forced migration and early twenty-first century mobility. The song captures the instability of the immigrant, framed as "a traveler, flying in the air, and moving on the ground." Indeed, Aster describes the song as "traveling music ...about a woman who travels and asks her heart back from a man." (Interview with Aster Aweke, 6 April 2009) The song *Yiqrta* also explicitly invokes the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian tradition in its text. It refers to the centrality of the cult of Mary, well-established in the Ethiopian Church since the fifteenth century, with the vocal cries seeking forgiveness in a manner recalling a penitential prayer.

"*Yiqrta*" makes clear the ties between love, longing, and the strains of travel and displacement. Once again, we encounter the singer's consciousness of the power of song both to express and, hopefully, to resolve the pain of love and longing as "night and day" she sings to herself. One also confronts the visceral nature of love, a feeling in the gut that is caused by estrangement from the distant lover. Love is not only tied to nourishment and fecundity, but is here wedded to awareness of heart and internal organs, a common image in Ethiopian literature and poetry. "*Yiqrta*," too, provides a clear feeling of the impact of displacement, seeking to either locate the beloved or to be found by him. This song is also set in the *tizita* mode/tuning

system, so that its text of longing is reinforced by its melody. Once again, singer Aster Aweke brings deep-seated emotion to the performance, with vocalizations on “Ah” that underscore the visceral nature of love’s pain expressed.

***Yiqrta* (“Forgive Me)**

Refrain: Is he there, is he there?

I have something to tell him, I have.

Is he there, is he there?

I am a traveler, flying in the air, and moving on the ground.

Night and day, oh, I sing to myself.

[Ah, ah] For the Virgin, for My Lord’s mother,

[Ah, ah] Put my heart in its place and give it back to me.

[Ah, ah] I am a traveler, let me finish my love.

With forgiveness, give me back my heart

Forgive me, forgive me , Forgive me (2 x)

(Repetition of Refrain)

My gut (intestines) can’t tolerate it when you get upset,

Love moves fast, like an unexpected flood.

Your teeth look like the cream of the milk,

You found me, you found me, and I don’t know what to do.

(Repetition of Refrain)

Conclusion

We can now return to the first two lines of the song “Tizita,” which reads “You are my memory, I have no other memory.” In instances of forced separation, music in fact becomes a place of memory on multiple levels. We have seen above that song both reflects and conveys emotion, triggering feelings formed in the past. Song is a rich repository of memory, capable of conveying and sustaining the love of an individual, of family, and/or of country. In diaspora, it serves as a surrogate for all that has been lost. The performance of a song further provides a moment of catharsis, when the pain of love lost can be acknowledged and experienced fully throughout the body and soul. From the twelfth-century French minstrel to the twenty-first century Ethiopian immigrant, song expresses in a poignant and deeply felt way the experience of love from afar. It sustains the residue of longing as love is both retained and lost across great distances and over the course of years. It also provides a space for multiple levels of meaning and ambiguity. Here we can end with the final, ambiguous words of Saariaho’s heroine, Clémence, who at the conclusion of “Love from Afar” kneels and begins to pray facing the body of dead lover, which is arranged to resemble an altar:

“If you are called Love I adore only you, Lord. If you are called Goodness I adore only you, If you are called Pardon I adore only you, Lord, If you are called Passion, I

adore only you. My prayer rises to you who are so far from me now, To you who are so far. Forgive me for having doubted your love, Forgive me for having doubted you! You who gave your life for me, Forgive me for having remained so distant. Now that it is you who are distant, Are you still there to hear my prayers? Now it is you who are distant, Now you are the distant love, Lord, Lord, you are love, You are the distant Love.” (Libretto by Amin Maalouf, 1999, translated © Chester Music Ltd.)

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